SCHOOL OF
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Graduate Studies in the Religion Department

With twelve full-time faculty, the Religion Department administers no less than four different graduate programmes, two of which are jointly operated with other departments. There is a doctoral programme with 36 students focusing on Comparative Ethics and Judaic Studies, coordinated with a corresponding doctoral programme administered by the Département des sciences religieuses at the University of Quebec at Montreal; an M.A. programme in the History and Philosophy of Religion, with 26 students, an M.A. in Judaic Studies with 13 students; and a Diploma programme in Theological, Religious and Ethical Studies, with 17 students, which is administered jointly with the Theology and Philosophy Departments.

Doctoral seminar led by Dr. Fred Bird (far left)

All these programmes engage in what might aptly be called comparative studies. In the master's and doctoral programmes students are expected to gain mastery in the knowledge of at least two distinct religious traditions. Each student's interest in any one religious movement is thereby enriched by corresponding studies of at least one other major religion's history and thought.

Because religious phenomena are typically intertwined with and given expression by other political, cultural and social realities, this comparative study of religion is a characteristically multi-dimensional enterprise. It involves students as well in relevant philosophical, historical and anthropological studies. For example, although not formally involved in ethnic studies, graduate students in religion have undertaken studies of Jewish, Muslim, Irish Catholic, Tibetan, Vietnamese Buddhist and Hindu populations in Montreal as part of their comparative studies of religion.

Students enter graduate studies in religion from diverse backgrounds and with quite varied objectives. Students have come from India, Bangladesh, Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon, Vietnam, Israel and Taiwan, as well as the United States and Canada. A minority of graduate students in religion enroll in these programmes in order directly to prepare for teaching careers. A number of students who have used their graduate degree in religion as a stepping stone towards academic positions are now teaching at other colleges and universities in Canada and elsewhere. More typically, people who already hold teaching and/or clergy positions pursue graduate studies in religion to strengthen or advance their positions. Graduate students have come from various religions and denominations including Pentecostal, Anglican, United Church and Catholic clergy, Or-

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thodox and Reconstructionist Rabbis, Buddhist and Muslim clergy, as well as university, college, and high school teachers in Religion, Humanities and English.

Most graduate students in Religion thus pursue these studies quite independently of any career ambitions: they engage in these studies out of personal interest, and/or as a form of cultural broadening. Almost all of these students and most of the career-minded students are part-time. For their full-time regular work, graduate students in religion include people working as nurses, physiotherapists, therapists, librarians, business executives, accountants, astrologers, teachers, musicians, lawyers, computer programmers, retired workers, clergy and yoga instructors.

Theses, dissertations reflect wide range of interests

M.A. students may elect either a thesis or non-thesis option, and must take two comprehensive exams, covering either two different religious traditions, in the comparative religion case, or two different historical periods in the case of Judaism. M.A. students have written theses on topics such as truth-telling and error in the clinical setting; Jewish mysticism; the treatment of usury (interest payments) in the Bible, Mishnah and Talmud; denominational switching; Jewish and Christian theologies of the Holocaust and the psychology of mysticism. At the doctoral level, each student must sit for three different comprehensive exams, covering at least two different religious traditions, and write a dissertation. Recent and current dissertations include topics as diverse as: a study of archaeological sites in third to seventh century Palestine, the rise and fall of Christian Lebanon, post-modern theology, reproductive ethics for women, an historical study of the public and religious responses to homosexuality in Quebec, Nayar Women in South Indian, the ethics of suicide, religious roles for women in the early Christian movement, and a feminist sexual ethic.

Many graduate students have been especially grateful for the opportunity they have enjoyed in combining their particular interests and vocations with their theses and dissertations. For example, **Patricia O'Rourke**, who works as patient representative at the Royal Victoria Hospital looked into the question of how doctors and nurses deal with medical errors and incidents. In her thesis she looked at both sociological, philosophical, and theological literature as well as clinical studies and developed her own case for candor. **Bassem Khalifah**, a local businessman and emigrant from Lebanon, has undertaken studies to explore the relationship between religion and politics over the last 150 years of Lebanese history. These studies provide a useful perspective, he thinks, for understanding contemporary events in that country. **Michel Boulet** participated in a research project sponsored by UQAM which studied suicide notes. He built upon these studies to write a dissertation on the Ethics of Suicide. **Norma Joseph**, a Jewish feminist, has been especially interested in exploring the typical ways Orthodox Jewish thinkers deal with issues facing women. She has taken initiative to call for and bring about changes in public and Jewish law to make the position of divorced Jewish women less subject to the whims of their ex-husbands. In her dissertation she has examined closely and critically the response of a leading Orthodox jurist, Rabbi Moses Feinstein.

While students have been able to pursue quite diverse topics as part of their graduate studies in religion, what binds all the department's programmes together is a common commitment to historically grounded comparative studies. This commitment is institutionalized in the stipulation that all master's and doctoral students take required courses in the methods and discipline of comparative studies and in the common assumption, found in the classes and seminars, that religions are, whatever else they might be, historically developing human phenomena.

Scholarship and Research in the Religion Department

The Religion Department has gained a solid reputation for research and scholarship. The faculty are well published, have authored widely cited works in a number of fields, and have received extensive external funding for research projects, conferences and publications. Two faculty members, Professor Michel Despland and Professor Emeritus Charles Davis, have been granted the prestigious Killam Fellowships for established scholars.

The scholarly interests of the faculty are quite broad, including and often combining together research programmes and empirical investigations typical of both the humanities and social sciences. They have made notable contributions in several areas including the Philosophy of Religion, Judaic Studies, Comparative Ethics, and Women and Religion. The diversity and the character of faculty scholarship is best seen by reviewing the work of a few faculty members.

Professor **Michel Despland** has written major works on the philosophers Kant and Plato, entitled *Kant: History and Religion and The Education of Desire: Plato and the Philosophy of Religion.* He has also edited a series of papers on the contemporary philosopher/theologian Paul Tillich, written detailed historical studies of the development in Europe of popular and scientific ideas about religion and of the study of religion in Quebec. For a number of years he has especially focused on the growth in the study of religion in France in the nineteenth century. He has written as well on topics as varied as Christian attitudes towards the body and Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction. Having grown up in Switzerland and graduated from the University of Lausanne, he received his doctorate from Harvard. He has recently re-established connections with the continent through the purchase of a home in southern France. He has served as an associate Dean of Arts and Sciences, an Associate Vice-Rector for Research, and a fellow of the Liberal Arts College. He currently serves as the associate director for the doctorate in Religion.

Professor **Jack Lightstone** has primarily conducted his research on Judaism in the Ancient World. What distinguishes his work from that of other students of Rabbinic thought is a thoroughgoing commitment to bring anthropological perspectives to bear on this material. In one work, *Commerce of the Sacred: Mediation of the Divine Among the Jews in the Greco-Roman Diaspora,* he analyzed the typical religious perceptions and experiences of Jews outside

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Susan Jean Palmer Ph.D.: Fall 1992 Concordia Graduate

Exploring New Religious Movements

Susan J. Palmer's graduate studies in religion commenced after she had received a B.A. Honours English from McGill in 1968, and was simultaneously pursuing a diploma in harpsichord performance, studying under Mireille Lagace at the Conservatoire de Musique and then under John Grew at McGill. Her interest in religion, she explains, derives from her family background:

"Religion was always a controversial topic at the dinner table. You see, we are fifth generation Mormons, and the only reason we are Canadians is because my great great grandmothers had to cross the border into Canada to protect their polygamous husbands from state persecution after Utah joined the Union in 1893."

Her interest in the sociological method was sparked by her immersion in the counter culture: "I originally went out to Berkeley California to study harpsichord with Alan Curtis. Since I was financially insolvent, I was attracted to communal living and hitch-hiking. Having spent my childhood in Europe I was puzzled by the extravagance of Californian culture, and the social upheavals and confusion of the "hippie" movement. I was intrigued by the anti-intellectualism and mystical orientation of my friends who all had their guru and defined themselves as spiritual seekers. Accompanying them to their meditation sessions, I was easily distracted by watching how people behaved towards each other."

Palmer's academic explorations into new religions began when she worked on a research project directed by Dr. Frederick Bird of the Concordia's Religion Department. "It involved going out and finding strange and delightful spiritual groups, attending their meetings and interviewing their members. I felt comfortable with the sociology of religion because you could participate and experience, and then step back and analyze." When the project ended, Palmer continued to investigate spiritual groups, collect interviews and "cult" literature as a "hobby — more than a hobby — perhaps a vocation. People would tell me about their spiritual adventures, waiting for the end of the world, meeting their guru, they would describe mystical states of consciousness, they would tell me about power struggles in the commune, and the problems in controlling and redefining their sexuality on the spiritual path and the leader's experiments with gender..."

Gender roles and alternative families

Experimenting with sex roles at the margins of religion is the topic of her thesis, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions.* Presenting a portrait of women's roles in seven new religions (including the "moonies" and "Hare Krishnas" as well as more obscure groups like IAM, the commune founded by Ottawa housewife, Winnifred Barton in which older women were encouraged to marry much younger men as their "Yin-Yang Unit" because the end of the world had already occurred and they believed themselves immortal.) She interprets the "simple, stylized, and religiously validated gender roles" developed in these groups as responses to changes in the structure of the family and to the ambiguity surrounding gender roles. Quotes from literature issuing from these movements support her thesis that "cult leaders" are harsh critics of American family life and are self-consciously creating alternative "families" and well-defined rules of sexual ethics and etiquette which appeal to young people disillusioned with the chaos and confusion of modern courtship rituals and the fragility of sexual relationships and family ties. "I chose to focus on women's experiences in these groups, partly because their roles tend to be more extreme and different than men's, and partly because I feel that women suffer more from the upheavals in family life today. Also, women seem to describe their spiritual path within the context of human relationships, whereas the men I interviewed were more likely to explain their conversion in ideological terms."

Palmer has published twelve papers on new religious movements in *Sociological Analysis* and other journals, and has co-authored *The Rajneesh Papers* with Dr. Arvind Sharma of McGill, published by Motilal Banarsidass, which will be out this year. Her study of a local "UFO cult," the Raelians, will appear in a SUNY Press anthology, *The Gods Have Landed,* edited by James Lewis. Having received an "outstanding" on her doctoral thesis, which is currently being considered for publication by Syracuse University Press, she expresses her aspirations simply: "I hope to get grants so I can teach less and write more. I need to hang out with spiritual groups more and spend more time with my kids."

Children in new religions

Palmer was just awarded a grant from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion for a research project on children raised in new religious movements, so this prospect seems likely. "I got into this area by accident," she said. "While I was researching women's roles, I often had to bring my kids along. Naturally, the mothers in these groups would start talking to me and I received some singular advice on how to raise children. Also my kids would be off doing "research" on their own. For example, the Elders in the Northeast Kingdom would be explaining to me how they did not permit their kids to have pocket money or 'fantasy' as opposed to 'imagination' toys, because they wanted them to be alert and ready to hear the call of Yahshua in the imminent Millennium, and then my kids would come back from playing with their kids and would describe how they'd been taken to a stash of toys and coins buried in the garden!"

Palmer is presently teaching at Dawson College

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of the areas like Palestine and Babylon, where Rabbinic Judaism was more prevalent. In a second work, *Society, the Sacred and Scripture in Ancient Judaism*, he explored the ways in which a particular view of Judaism gained authority as the normative standard, over other views which at the time were widely accepted. More recently, he has adopted the same perspective to analyze the writing of the Babylonian Talmud. Professor Lightstone grew up in Ottawa and attended Carleton University, before gaining his doctorate at Brown. He has served as graduate programme director of the doctoral programme, as chair of the Religion Department, and more recently, as Associate Vice-Rector for Research.

Numerous publications

Professor **Frederick Bird** has written and conducted research broadly in the areas of comparative ethics and the sociology of Religion. For a number of years he directed group research projects in contemporary religious movements, supervising in the process a number of doctoral and M.A. theses, and writing several definitive articles on this topic. He also directed subsequent group research projects on contemporary ritual practices, including a series of studies co-directed with Professor Lightstone, on contemporary Jewish rituals. He has written several widely cited articles on comparative ethics, including a recent one in *Social Compass* on "How do Religions Affect Moralities?" More recently he has applied this comparative perspective to the study of business ethics. He has written two books on this topic: *Good Management: Business Ethics in Action* and *A Practical Role for Ethics in Business.* He now serves as graduate programme director for the doctoral programme, and previously directed the M.A. in the History and Philosophy of Religion. For a number of years he regularly taught theory courses in the Sociology Department and now teaches for both the Management Department and the Executive MBA. Born in the United States, Professor Bird graduated from Harvard, worked in San Francisco, and received his doctorate from a joint programme between The Graduate Theological Union and the Sociology Department at the University of California.

Professor **Sheila McDonough**'s scholarly interests include both modern Islam, especially on the Indian sub-continent, women and religion, and comparative religion more generally. She has been with the Religion Department since the early 1960's and has variously served as chair, more recently director of the M.A. in History and Philosophy of Religion. She has written books on Muslim Ethics, on the founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Her most recent book is *Tabirak Ke Nam: Religion, Ideology and Women in Pakistan.* A native of Calgary, she received her master's and doctoral degrees from McGill University.

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and is a part time lecturer at Concordia, where she has taught *Women in Religion,* and is beginning the Death and Dying course this term. "I enjoy teaching, but I miss the luxury of being a student. When I was writing my thesis, I would hear other doctoral students complaining about their advisors and professors and I realized how lucky I was. Fred Bird, my advisor, always seemed to understand what I was trying to say and fed me the appropriate theories — and of course he's an expert on history of the family and new religions; and Charles Davis' lectures were inspiring aesthetically as well as intellectually, and Sheila McDonough was great at helping me reorganize both my M.A. and my Ph.D. theses so the argument made sense. I try to send all my talented Dawson students to Concordia's Religion Department — and I keep bumping into them here."

School of Graduate Studies

Interdisciplinary speaker series

The School of Graduate Studies will be hosting an Interdisciplinary Speaker Series during the Winter 1993 term.

Speaker: Professor Jim Sandborn of Washington, D.C.
Date: Thursday, March 4, 1993
Time: 8:00 p.m.
Place: H-773 Hall Building, 1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. W.
Title: Natural Settings

Speaker: Professor Constance Penley of University of California at Santa Barbara
Date: Wednesday, April 7, 1993
Time: 6:00 p.m.
Place: DL 200, 7141 Sherbrooke St. W.
Title: Spaced Out: Remembering Christa McAuliffe

All members of the university community are welcome to attend.

For further information, contact

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GRADUATE SYMPOSIUM

What is the Human?

Date: Wednesday, March 10, 1993

**For further information, contact
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